



Volume 31/Issue 4

Nuthatches

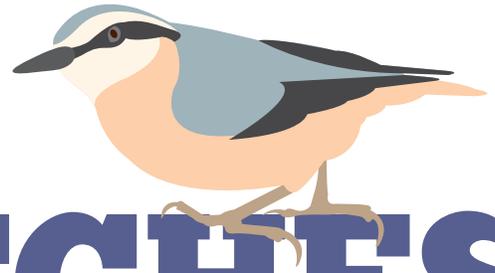
December 2017

NUTHATCHES



INSIDE:
Meet the Nuthatches
The Woodpecker Family
Safety in Numbers

MEET THE NUTHATCHES



If you spend any time in a forest, you are likely to hear and see nuthatches. Like woodpeckers, these small gray birds live in the trees. Their loud calls sound a bit like a tin horn. And nuthatches seem to like to “toot their horns!” Their nearly constant calls helps you spot which tree they are in, but seeing them can be harder. Their gray backs and flattened posture helps them blend in against the bark. If they detect a nearby predator they become quiet and still, making them nearly impossible to see.

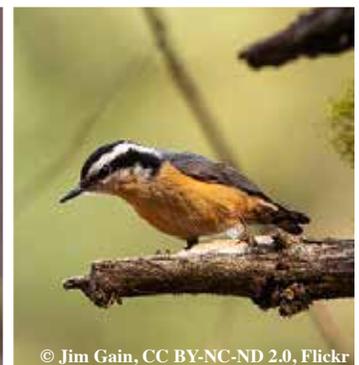
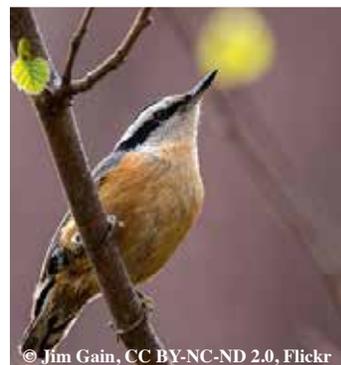
Twenty-five species of nuthatch can be found around the world. Four live in the United States and three of these live here in Idaho---red-breasted nuthatch, white-breasted nuthatch and pygmy nuthatch. All nuthatches are small, about four to six inches long. They have squared tails and the bottom half of their beak is upturned. This helps them catch insect prey hiding in bark crevices. Nuthatches eat many different kinds of insects. In the winter they also eat seeds. The name “nuthatch” comes from how they hack open seeds. People used to call them nuthacks. Over time, this word became nuthatch.

Nuthatches spend a lot of time hitching head-first down tree trunks or along branches. They have strong legs with long claws on their toes. The toe that faces backwards is larger than the three forward-facing toes. This helps the nuthatch grasp tree bark. It also uses one leg like a bicycle kickstand to prop against the tree trunk. This upside down way of moving helps nuthatches find food that woodpeckers miss when they hitch up a tree. This allows both kinds of birds to find food, sharing the same habitats.

Because they live in forested areas, nuthatches are cavity nesters. They usually excavate their own nest. White-breasted nuthatches also use natural tree cavities or old woodpecker nests. Red-breasted nuthatches have the unusual habit of spreading sticky pine sap around the entrance of their nest. Instead of sap, white-breasted

nuthatches use smelly insects. It is thought that the sap and insects help keep predators away from the nest.

In the winter, nuthatches join chickadees, brown creepers and downy woodpeckers to form a mixed flock. The birds move around a habitat looking for food. Their calls are easily heard across the snowy winter landscape. Take some time this winter to look and listen for Idaho’s nuthatches.



Idaho's Nuthatches



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Red-breasted Nuthatch

- Lives mainly in forests of pine, fir and spruce trees
- Just over four inches in length
- Blue-gray back with a reddish belly and chest
- Black or gray cap with a black stripe across the eyes
- Likes sunflower seeds in the winter



White-breasted Nuthatch

- Our largest nuthatch---five to six inches long
- Blue-gray back with white belly, chest and face
- Black or gray cap and neck that looks like a hood
- Lives mostly in deciduous forests, parks and backyards



Pygmy Nuthatch

- Named for its small size, this nuthatch is just under four inches long
- Lives in forests of long-needled pine trees like ponderosa pine
- During winter nights, roosts in tree cavities in large groups of up to 100 birds
- Blue-gray back with buffy belly and chest and a brown cap
- Sounds like the squeaking of a rubber ducky



THE Woodpecker Family

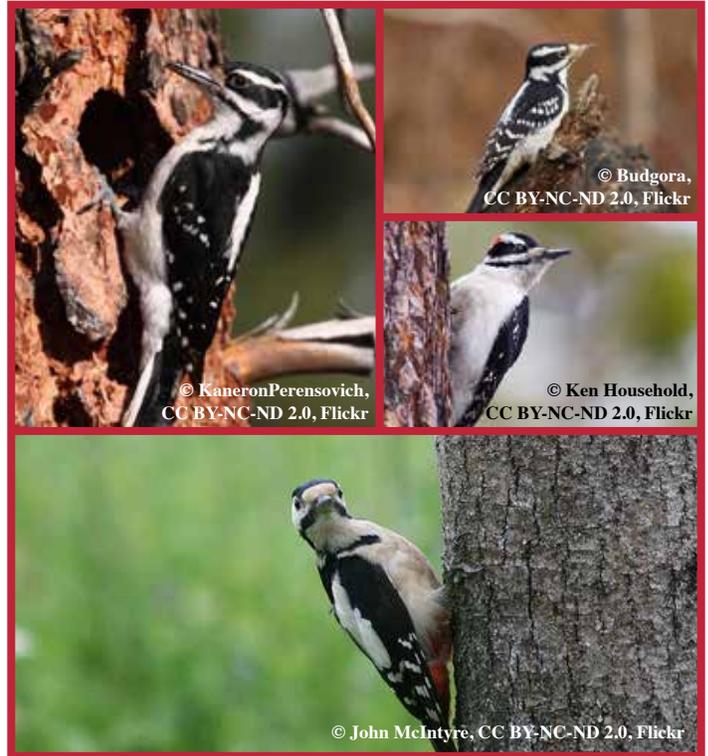
Because nuthatches are usually seen clinging to tree trunks, they are often mistaken for woodpeckers. In fact, they are not related at all. To help you tell the difference, check out what direction the bird's head is pointed. If the bird is going head-first **down** the tree, it's a **nuthatch**. If it's going head-first **up** the tree, it's a **woodpecker**. Read on to learn more about how woodpeckers have adapted to life in the trees.

Several things make living in the trees a breeze for woodpeckers. Unlike other birds, woodpeckers have feet with two toes pointing forward and two toes pointing backward. This is called a "zygodactyl" (zEYE-go-DAC-till) foot. Woodpecker toes have long, sharp, curved claws to help hold on to tree bark.

A woodpecker's tail is also specialized for climbing. It helps support the bird when it climbs. The tail also acts as a brace when the woodpecker hammers on wood. All the tail feathers are stiff. The two middle tail feathers are pointed. They are reinforced by ridges and inward-curving barbs. These help strengthen the middle tail feathers. Wide pelvic bones with strong muscles move and hold the tail as the bird climbs.

So, what's the big deal with climbing trees? Woodpeckers are insect eaters and trees are full of the insects they like to eat. Ants, wood-boring beetles, termites, and many other insects can be found in and on trees. Many trees also produce fruits, berries, and seeds that woodpeckers eat in the winter. You could say that a tree is the perfect pantry for a woodpecker.

Woodpeckers look for their food all over tree trunks and branches.



They even listen for insects living inside a tree. They use their amazing tongue to grab insects wherever they find them. A woodpecker's tongue is very sticky. It also has barbs on the end to help it catch insects. Woodpeckers have a unique structure that lets the bird stick its tongue out almost five inches! This is called the "hyoid" (HI-yoid) apparatus. It is made up of two bones covered in muscle. The hyoid apparatus slides around the skull to extend the tongue. This helps the bird capture insects hiding inside a tree.

Woodpeckers make cavities in trees for roosting at night and for nesting. The cavity entrance is usually narrow and then opens into a deep chamber. Wood chips on the bottom cushion the one to six white eggs during incubation. Baby woodpeckers quickly outgrow their nest cavity. They leave about a month after hatching. Woodpeckers usually do not re-use a nest, but old woodpecker nests are used by many different animals.

THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB

Tools are important for helping get things done. Think about all the tools people use. From something as simple as a pencil to as complex as a robotic arm, tools are very helpful. Some animals also use tools, including several different kinds of birds.

Some of the most famous tool-using birds are the finches of the Galapagos Islands. The woodpecker finch digs insects out of holes using a cactus spine or splinter of wood. If the spine or splinter is too long or too short, the finch will find another or trim it to the right length. Some gulls and crows use rocks to break open the shells of mussels or clams. Ravens use twigs to move food close enough so they can grab it. Herons bait fish by placing twigs, leaves, insects or other objects on the water it is standing in.

Even nuthatches use tools. The brown-headed nuthatch of the southern United States uses tools to find food. These birds pry up bits of bark using another piece of bark. This helps them find hidden insects. Red-breasted nuthatches have been seen using a twig to spread sap around their nest entrance. Using tools is often considered a sign of intelligence. Being a bird brain must not be such a bad thing after all.



SAFETY IN NUMBERS



Many kinds of animals spend time in groups. Think of a herd of elk, flock of geese or a school of fish. Hanging out together helps you stay safe. With more eyes on the look-out, it is harder for a predator to sneak up and find a meal. This lets the group spend more time feeding and less on watching for predators. More eyes also make it easier to find food because more members of the group are searching.

Nuthatches often spend time with other species of birds. Chickadees, brown creepers, kinglets and downy woodpeckers are frequent companions. These mixed flocks occur in the winter when it is harder to find food. As the flock

moves around the habitat, all of its members are searching for food. When a food source is found, all of the birds can benefit. You can observe mixed flocks at your backyard bird feeders.

Mixed flocks also work together to drive away a predator such as an owl or hawk. The smaller birds will dive-bomb the predator and make a lot of noise. This is called mobbing. Since an owl is trying to snooze during the day, this would be pretty annoying. It might be just enough to convince the owl to fly away and find a more peaceful place to nap. Once the predator is gone, the mixed flock can go back to the important business of finding food.

Helping Hands

Believe it or not, being a parent is not an easy job. Parents work hard to raise their children. Having some help can be a huge benefit. Older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles or other relatives can all be important in helping out. Many wild animals also have help in raising their youngsters. In some mammals like elk or elephants, older babies often hang out in groups and are looked after by several adults. This is called a crèche (kreSH). Parent wolves rely on other members of the pack to babysit the pups while the rest of the pack hunts.

Birds are another group of animals that sometimes have help to raise their babies. In fact, nearly 250 different kinds of bird have nest helpers. These helpers are often the older



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siblings of the new babies. American crows, acorn woodpeckers and Florida scrub-jays are examples of birds with nest helpers. By helping at the nest, scientists think that nest helpers also learn how to be a parent bird. This will help them be good parents when they have babies of their own.

Here in Idaho, the tiny pygmy nuthatch uses nest helpers. They are usually male siblings of the nestlings. These helpers defend and feed the new babies. Once the babies leave the nest, the entire family travels together for the rest of the summer. When winter arrives, several nuthatch families will join together. These flocks are very social. They sound like a group of squeaking rubber duckyies as they move through the trees. Listen for them this winter if you are enjoying outside time in a ponderosa pine forest.



Feeding Birds

Winter has arrived and now is the perfect time to put up some bird feeders. Feeding wildlife is usually not a good thing to do, but birds are different. They do not become dependent on feeders. Instead, birds just include yards with feeders in their daily search for food. If the feeders are empty, the birds move on to other food sources.

You can buy bird feeders or build your own. Building a bird feeder is a fun family project. Look for feeder plans at the library or on the internet. Make several kinds of feeders to feed different birds. Tube feeders attract birds like house finch, goldfinch, chickadee and nuthatch. Platform feeders will attract these birds as well as house sparrow, junco, song sparrow and Steller's jay. Ground feeders are a favorite with mourning dove, junco, white-crowned sparrow and California quail. Good foods for birds include

black-oil sunflower seed, millet, nyger thistle, and safflower seed.

Nuthatches, woodpeckers and chickadees also like to eat suet and other bird puddings. Suet is basically fat. When heated, it melts and you can add things like bird seed, dried fruit or peanut butter. Once it cools, the mixture will harden into the shape of the container you used. In the dead of winter, suet is a high-calorie snack that helps keep the birds warm. Suet is usually offered in a suet basket. You can buy one or make one using hardware wire. You can also buy suet in blocks that fit the basket. Making suet or bird puddings can be a fun and sometimes messy family project. Check out the internet for recipes that will attract the birds in your yard.

Enjoy feeding the birds. You might be amazed at what you see right outside your window!



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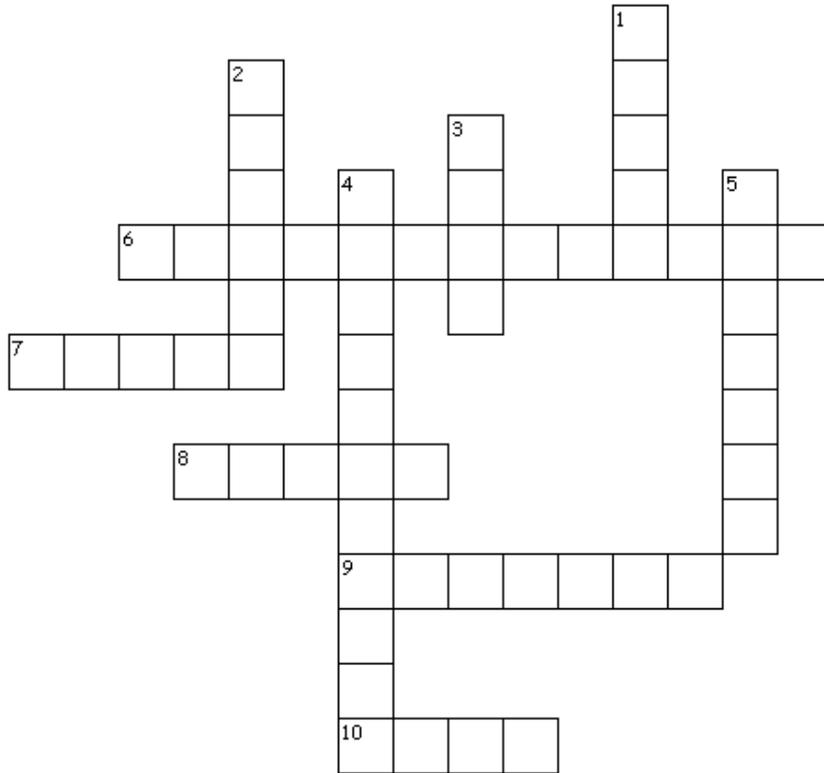


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Nuthatch Puzzle



- | Words |
|----------------|
| Cavity |
| Down |
| Helpers |
| Horn |
| Pygmy |
| Red-breasted |
| Squared |
| Three |
| Tools |
| White-breasted |

Across

- This is Idaho's largest nuthatch.
- This is Idaho's smallest nuthatch.
- The number of nuthatch species that live in Idaho.
- The tail of a nuthatch is _____ on the end.
- Nuthatches go head-first _____ a tree.

Down

- Some nuthatches have been known to use _____.
- Nuthatches are _____ nesters.
- Nuthatches have a loud call that sounds like a tin _____.
- This nuthatch is named for the color of its belly and chest.
- Pygmy nuthatches have nest _____.

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express,
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